

The Paul Dooley Project - Part 1 : Robert Altman's Popeye (1980)

TV STORE ONLINE: How did you come to work with Robert Altman on POPEYE (1980)?

DOOLEY: I was working with Bob Altman on a film called Health (1979) at the time and right when we were in the middle of production in Malta he said to me, "*I'm doing POPEYE next.*" I said, "*Great!*" Then Bob said, "*There's a part for you in it if you'd like one.*" Then not long after that he told me, "*You're playing Wimpy*". Then I thought to myself that while even though I had gained a few pounds I didn't see myself as a guy with that big balloon nose and those big puffy cheeks but then again no one really looks like that. Shelley Duvall was the only one who almost actually looked like the character that she played. Shelley told me while we were shooting POPEYE that in middle school her nickname was "Olive Oyl".

TV STORE ONLINE: Is there any truth to the rumor that Paramount had originally wanted Gilda Radner to play the role of "Olive Oyl" in POPEYE?

DOOLEY: They were considering Gilda and they were also interested in Lily Tomlin too. This was before Bob had come onto the project though. Originally the studio had wanted Dustin Hoffman to play Popeye and Lily Tomlin to play Olive Oyl but really I don't know if it would've ever happened. I think the studio was just batting those names around. I think that Lily would have been great as Olive Oyl. She is very gifted as a character actress. When Bob came onto the project those names were gone. Dustin left because he didn't get along with POPEYE screenwriter Jules Feiffer. They had creative differences over the character. Robin Williams did a great job on POPEYE thought. He made all of those incredible facial expressions. He was just brilliant as Popeye.

TV STORE ONLINE: I know you have a background in drawing comics for newspapers...Did you do any research on Wimpy prior to the start of shooting?

DOOLEY: No because if you want to do research you just need to watch or read one Popeye. He's always standing passively into the background eating a hamburger. Very often I would be in a scene with Robin and Shelley and there was always a hillside behind them, and there would be Wimpy standing in the background. He was always like a fly on the wall. I mean, I can remember reading Popeye as a kid so I knew what he looked like already and I knew the things that he would say, so there was no real research. My assignment for myself was that I didn't want to look like Oliver Hardy. I didn't wanna be a fat man with bangs who happened to wear a derby, and I didn't want to look like Jackie Gleason's original Reginald Van Gleason. Those are both graceful fat men. In the drawing of Wimpy in the comic there are three pen strokes coming out from under his derby that is

supposed to be his hair. It's the same thing with his moustache. How do you turn that into hair for the movie? So I did the best I could with that.

I did something very subtle that no one knows about....A couple of years ago I went to a party and met the film critic Leonard Maltin. Leonard knows everyone and everything. He's a walking movie encyclopedia. It turned out that we lived in the same neighborhood out here so we exchanged email addresses. In one of his emails to me he used the word "Armetta". So I wrote him back asking if the reason why he had used that word was because he was referring to the 1940's actor Henry Armetta. He responded, telling me that he was referencing the very same guy. I thought this was really weird because when we were shooting POPEYE I had thought about Henry Armetta. He was a 40's era character actor who usually played Italian restaurant owners in the films that he did. He had a very unique way of moving, and when I was trying to figure out how Wimpy would move, because remember in the comic we don't see movement, I had remembered seeing Henry Armetta in movies because of the way that he moved. He moved crooked. He almost moved with his upper half of his body out in front of the rest of himself. He moved like his ribcage was leading the way. So that's what I did with Wimpy, and I just thought it was great that Leonard Maltin knew who Henry Armetta was and that he thought about him in relation to POPEYE.

I also learned from doing nine million television commercials in my life that if you want something to stick out on camera you don't hold whatever you're holding in front of the costume you're wearing. That's why actors are always holding whatever out next to this face or really far out from their body. So that's why when you watch POPEYE you'll see me eating a hamburger but I'm always holding it really far away from my body.

TV STORE ONLINE: Right, and speaking of the Wimpy hamburger....How many did you eat over the course of the shoot?

DOOLEY: Well, I found that in the first week of shooting that I hated them. The reason why I hated them was because of the fact that in Malta they didn't have any cattle. So the meat that the burgers were made out of had to be flown in from Germany. And it just wasn't the same either...I wasn't like these were burgers made from beef that came from Iowa. The meat was really tough, and while you're shooting you don't really wanna eat too much anyhow because on Take 2 you have to eat a little more, then on Take 3 you eat some more and eventually you've gotten yourself sick. It's either that or you're going to a spit bucket between takes and I learned how to do that from shooting commercials. So what I did, and this is why I love visual comedy so much, is that when we'd start a scene I'd take a bite out of a hamburger, then they'd cut away from me, but when the camera would come back to me you'd see that another bite was gone from the burger, but it was a prop burger. The prop guy had made me a one bite missing burger and a two bite missing burger so that when the camera would come back to me, it would look like I

was eating it, but I really was just putting my tongue into my cheek and pretending to chew. Those prop burgers even had sesame seeds on them too.

TV STORE ONLINE: There have been many things written and rumored about how troubled the production of POPEYE was over the years...What are your thoughts on that? Was it a troubled production?

DOOLEY: Well everything went smoothly during POPEYE. I think what happened with all of that is that Bob really liked to go and shoot places where the studio couldn't bother him. He didn't like it when people from the studio could come and visit the set, he really considered them a thorn in his side. Bob did something during POPEYE that saved the studio a bunch of money, but in the end caused him a lot of trouble. Normally, the way you shoot a film...You save what they call "cover sets". If you're planning on shooting a scene outside, but it rains, then you go inside and shoot. Those scenes are called "cover sets". Bob had fifty actors on POPEYE and at a certain point he had shot everything with about 43 of those actors and then sent them home. This meant that for the last three weeks of the shoot those actors didn't get paid a per diem or their salary because they were done. This saved the studio a ton of money.

By the end of the shoot the weather got really bad in Malta and because Bob had sent everyone home he had no cover sets to fall back on, so when it came time to shoot stuff like the big boat chase we couldn't do it because the weather was so bad. For example, when they were trying to shoot Blutto's boat chasing Popeye's boat and the camera was on Blutto's boat the wind would make the other boat rock up and down so much that it would go out of frame and vice versa with Popeye's boat. It was impossible to shoot anything in the water. In those last three weeks we were lucky to get two days where we could shoot out of five, but there was one week where we got no days of shooting because of the weather. Now even though Bob had saved the studio money they didn't want to hear that he wasn't shooting, so when they'd call and he'd tell them that they were unable to shoot that day, they didn't want to hear that. The studio went crazy over it. They started accusing him of lying to them, and they were saying stuff like, "*There is no way that the wind is that bad.*" The studio even threatened to shut the movie down several times because of it, and I think that's the reason why now you hear stories about POPEYE being a troubled production.

TV STORE ONLINE: Did Altman handle that studio pressure well?

DOOLEY: Bob got very testy near the end. The studio was really bugging him. After the very last shot was finished he didn't even go back to his apartment to pack up. He had his whole family with him there. His son was his Asst. Cameraman and when he finished that last shot at noon that day he asked his wife to go and pack up and then follow him later because he got in a car and went straight from the set to the airport and got onto a plane and left. He had had enough. But he always got

impatient at the end of every movie he made. When a movie was about 85% done his mind got restless. His mind would wander onto the next project before he was finished with the one he was working on.

TV STORE ONLINE: What about Harry Nilsson on POPEYE? His music for the film is pretty incredible. Did you get to spend any time experiencing him?

DOOLEY: I didn't spend a lot of time with him. But he was there on the set often and I never saw him without a big bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand. He'd even bring with him to lunch! What a musical genius he was. He's got a great and funny way of repeating in POPEYE. Remember that song that Shelly sings "He Loves Me"? She sings, "*He loves me, he loves me, he loves me...*" Then there's that song that Blutto sings, "*I'm mean, I'm mean, I'm mean, you know what I mean?*" They're so simple and brilliant. Sweet Haven Nation Anthem really sounds like an anthem. Many of the actors never really thought that they had just spent six months in Malta. We thought that we had just spent six months in Sweet Haven. It was so much fun and those sets really had a life of their own.

TV STORE ONLINE: It's my understanding that the sets from POPEYE are still up and you can visit them in Malta?

DOOLEY: Right. It's called Popeye Village. Instead of tearing everything down the production gave that set to Malta and they turned it into a tourist attraction. There wasn't any wood in Malta so when they built those sets they had to import all of that wood from Canada and The Netherlands. It's one of the best sets I've ever seen.

TV STORE ONLINE: How about working with Ray Walston on POPEYE?

DOOLEY: Ray was terrific. He was an old-timer and a no BS guy. He always called a spade a spade and he was wonderfully cantankerous and he was fun in that way. "Poop Deck Pappy" was Ray Walston.

TV STORE ONLINE: Do you have a favorite scene in POPEYE?

DOOLEY: I really admire that one scene, and it's a very widely shot scene and we see the whole of the street in Sweet Haven....It's very early in the movie and at the end of the street is Olive Oyl's house. Her door opens and I come out as Wimpy and I start to walk past each house on the street and as I do people come out and join me in this parade and you hear the Sweet Haven Anthem. The music is very stirring and I've always liked seeing that and how you see Wimpy and the way he walks. I mean, the scene is supposed to take place in the morning time and there's Wimpy and he's already eating a hamburger...*laughing* It's not even lunch time...*laughing*

TV STORE ONLINE: There are those that say that Robert Altman was a gambler in regards to what types of stories/films he chose to give to his audience...At the end of it all do you think that POPEYE was his biggest gamble considering how the film faired with critics in The United States?

DOOLEY: I don't know. Bob really looked at everything he did with the excitement of a kid. I don't think he looked at POPEYE has it was a gamble. He never dwelled on what critics said of him. Critics I think did have something against him. They would say, "Bob Altman used to be good in the beginning but he's already had his day." He made enemies at every major studio in Hollywood because he was so outspoken, and at the end of it he had to scramble for money, but he never had a problem attracing actors because of the freedom he gave them. If he was a gambler it was with the ideas that he had. He didn't care about the critics and he didn't care about what the studio said. If he liked something he went ahead and pursued it. He had a dream once and he turned that into the film 3 WOMEN (1977). In the dream there was no ending, and in the film at the end there isn't an ending. Dreams don't finish. I admire a guy like Bob Altman because of how much guts he had.